NZ no longer clean, green or economically rational, says award-winning scientist

In the latest addition to the BWB Texts series, Dr Mike Joy offers a damning assessment of the state of New Zealand's freshwater environments. He points out that in the past two or three decades, 'freshwater environmental protection has been left weakened, under-regulated and often unenforced'; and that these failures have allowed a relatively small number of people to profit from polluting on a grand scale. But he also offers a prescription for confronting the crisis – which begins with serious recognition that the problem indeed exists.

Polluted Inheritance: New Zealand's Freshwater Crisis is an alarming wake-up call. Joy enumerates the interrelated problems we face, from water quality degradation to species extinction to heavy metal contamination of soil. He also takes a sharp look at how we got here: short-term thinking and the failure of legislation are writ large, as is the pursuit of profit over sustainable practice in food production.

While Joy does not absolve earlier governments, he is particularly critical of a culture he describes as prevalent under the current regime, which sees important environmental policy decisions based on assessment models that privilege 'growth, employment, asset values and returns on investment', while ignoring environmental health and the costs of degradation. Drawing on his scientist's facility with numbers, Joy has no trouble backing up his criticism with evidence that such decisions are not just environmentally but also – when viewed holistically – economically unsound.

Joy advocates for a 'clean, green healthy New Zealand in which swimming and fishing in lowland rivers' are non-negotiables rather than 'nice to haves'. In doing so, he calls for a purge of a contemporary school of environmental management that privileges political ideology over sound science and routinely ignores the true ecological costs of intensive agriculture.

He does so not as an activist or business naysayer, but as a scientifically trained observer, whose subject of expertise is the undeniably degraded state of our rivers, wetlands and lakes today. As such, his book forewarns of a disastrous ecological trajectory that requires our urgent attention.

What are BWB Texts?

BWB Texts are short books on big subjects by great New Zealand writers. Commissioned as short digital-first works, BWB Texts unlock diverse stories, insights and analysis from the best of our past, present and emerging New Zealand thinkers.

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BRIDGET WILLIAMS BOOKS

Polluted Inheritance

New Zealand's Freshwater Crisis

Mike Joy

New Zealand's dairy industry is big business. But what are the hidden – and not so hidden – costs of intensive farming?

Evidence presented here by ecologist Mike Joy demonstrates that intensive dairy farming has degraded our freshwater rivers, streams and lakes to such a degree that we face an environmental crisis. This perilous situation, he argues, has arisen primarily through governmental policy that prioritises short-term economic growth over long-term environmental sustainability. This BWB Text is a call to arms, urging New Zealand to change course in the face of environmental degredation that risks the wellbeing of future generations – and all life as we know it on these islands.

Author information

Mike Joy is a senior lecturer in ecology and environmental science at the Institute of Agriculture and Environment, Massey University, Palmerston North.

He is an advocate for environmental protection in New Zealand and has received a number of awards including an Ecology in Action award from the New Zealand Ecological Society and an Old Blue award from the Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society of New Zealand. In 2009 he was named Environmental New Zealander of the Year by *North and South* magazine, and in 2012 was the *Manawatu Evening Standard*'s person of the year. In 2014 he was awarded the Royal Society of New Zealand Charles Fleming Award for Environmental Achievement.



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Mike Joy is available for interview.

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